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"It's pretty hard right now," said Rep. Ray LaHood (R-Ill.). "[The financial crisis] has taken the energy out of the energy issue."

LaHood, who is not seeking reelection, said the issue could make a comeback if the markets stabilize and gas prices do not plummet.

While the collapse of investment firms has dominated the news cycle in recent days, Republicans on Capitol Hill are confident that energy, not Wall Street, will be on the minds of voters this fall.

"The economy is in great flux, the market is in great flux and stress, but every time [voters] go to the pump, they will be reminded," La Hood said.

Republicans also note that the bailout is so complex, it will not be a deciding factor in November.

Democrats counter that the need for the bailout is a direct result of failed Republican policies over the last seven-and-a-half years.

Rep. Neil Abercrombie (D-Hawaii) indicated the window for debating drilling expansion has closed.

"That, in a sense, has been resolved," said Abercrombie, who crafted a bipartisan drilling plan with Rep. John Peterson (R-Pa.). He noted that it is likely that the ban on offshore drilling in the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) will be lifted.

Abercrombie voted for the Democratic leadership's recent energy bill, saying it was better to send the measure to the Senate than vote it down. But the chances of a major energy deal getting done this year are slim.

Republicans have gotten a lot of traction criticizing Democrats on energy. They attracted widespread media attention for their energy protests on the House floor during the August recess, which played a role in forcing Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) to agree to a vote on a bill that called for offshore drilling.

GOP poll numbers have risen for both House and Senate candidates in recent weeks. Earlier this year, lawmakers on both sides of the aisle expected major gains for congressional Democrats. While many political observers believe Democrats will expand their majority in the House, few are anticipating a 2006-like wave.

Senate Republicans are expected to lose seats, but National Republican Senatorial Committee Chairman John Ensign (Nev.) last week sounded a rare optimistic tone. Citing support for oil drilling and GOP vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin, Ensign said, "I feel better than I did at any time in the past. I used to say that it would be a pretty darn good night if we only lost four seats. ... I think it's possible for us to hold where we are or even just lose one or two seats."

Oil prices spiked on Monday as congressional leaders mulled their next steps on the bailout plan.

House Republicans pounced, sending a press release on Tuesday titled, "Democrats Fiddle While Americans Literally Run Out of Gas."

The release added, "Will the Democrats — finally — allow an up-or-down vote on the American Energy Act, House Republicans' truly comprehensive, 'all-of-the-above' energy strategy? Hardly."

Several GOP members this week suggested that drilling and the use of American sources of energy could help ease the cost of the bailout to the American taxpayer.

Reps. Joe Barton (R-Texas) and Lynn Westmoreland (R-Ga.) suggested that opening up the OCS and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to drilling would give the Treasury more funds to work with.

Rep. Mike Pence (R-Ind.) linked the issues in a release earlier this week.

“Passing an energy bill that lessens the price of gasoline at the pump through more domestic drilling, wind, solar, nuclear and conservation would bring relief to family budgets and create American jobs,” Pence said.

Other House Republicans urged that the conference address one issue at a time while Congress is trying find a solution to ailing financial institutions.

“A lot of it really depends what happens in the next 10 days anyhow, so I think right now the financial situation is going to take everyone’s attention and all their energy, but after that it’s hard to say what would happen,” Rep. Jack Kingston (R-Ga.) said. “You know if this package passes and the market stabilizes and calms down, then energy comes back into the picture. When the economic engine to your car is on fire, you don’t worry about \$4 [a gallon] gas.”

Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.), who has urged his colleagues to support Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson’s plan given the critical nature of the financial crisis, said,

“I agree with my colleagues completely on energy, but again that will not solve this problem. I think that’s something we are going to need to look at once we get through this. The economy is still not going to be good and then we are going to need to look at a lot of [energy]-related proposals.”